

Remap bill goes to House floor

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The (Alexandria) Town Talk

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BATON ROUGE

— The state House and Governmental Affairs Committee on Friday passed a redistricting bill that increases the number of minority districts state-wide and reshapes many of the existing election districts.

Committee members voted 14-4 to send HB1 by Speaker of the House Jim Tucker, R-Terrytown, to the House floor for debate on Monday. From there, the bill would go to the Senate.

Under the new bill, minority districts would increase from 27 to 30, including one in Shreveport that was added in committee, making a fourth minority district there. New minority districts also would be established in Acadiana and in the Monroe area.

"As the plan stands today, we have, I believe, a good chance of pre-clearance" by the U.S. Department of Justice, which reviews election changes under the Voting Rights Act, Tucker said. "I think the plan is an effective plan. I think it's one that will move the state forward over the next 10 years."

Tucker had drawn a plan that would have set the number of minority districts at 29. But an

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amendment raising the number to 30 was pushed by Committee Chairman Rep. Rick Gallot, D-Ruston. It passed in a 10-9 vote, with some Republicans and an Independent voting for the increase.

About 32 percent of Louisiana's population is black but demographers and legislators say there's no way to legitimately shape one-third of the 105 House districts or 39 Senate districts so minorities could have a reasonable expectation of being elected.

Lafayette Rep. Nancy Landry, a Republican, said the Acadiana delegation welcomes a new minority district because "it gives us another voice in the Legislature." The district will be based in Iberia and St. Martin parishes with a portion of Lafayette Parish, running right through downtown Lafayette.

In Monroe, the new minority district was to be placed in a district currently represented by Rep. Kay Katz, a Republican who cannot run again because of term limits. Katz protested and won Friday when Rep. Rosalind Jones, D-Monroe, got committee approval of an amendment that restores much of Katz's district and shifts the minority district to another area.

Alexandria area lawmakers were not as fortunate. They were hoping for an amendment that would have solved problems with district lines slicing up the city.

But they did escape an amendment that would have Alexandria Democrats Chris Roy and Herbert Dixon facing each other in a race this fall.

Committee members decided not to vote on an amendment by House Speaker Jim Tucker that would have had Louisiana's central city primarily in a minority district pitting Democrat against Democrat. Dixon now represents minority District 26, which straddles the Red River and encompasses residents in Alexandria and Pineville.

"Apparently the (House Speaker Jim Tucker) pulled the amendment that was going to be voted on with Dixon and me in the same district," Roy said.

As the House bill now

stands, Roy would have to run against Democrat James Armes of Leesville in a district that would move west and include much of Vernon and Rapides parishes.

Armes and Roy said they don't look forward to running against each other because they are friends.

Roy said he hasn't decided whether to challenge the current district boundary when the bill is taken up by the full House next week.

Jones voted against the bill, saying she had problems with how some districts in southeast Louisiana were drawn. However, she said, "I'm

excited that the House has ... not retrogressed" by cutting minority voting strength in Louisiana.

The proposed remap would change House representation in Rapides Parish, where Rep. Billy Chandler, R-Dry Prong, would have some of north Rapides, and Rep. Rickey Nowlin, R-Natchitoches, would take in much of Rapides' northwest corner.

The Alexandria area has gained population, while Natchitoches has seen a decline. And speculation was Nowlin's district would not be drawn in Roy's district because of Republican power in

state government. Gov. Bobby Jindal and Speaker Tucker are Republicans, as is Nowlin.

"It ought not to be about Democrat and Republican," Dixon said.

Roy, Dixon and Armes said there might be a challenge to remap the plan on the floor of the House, where they could try to get Roy into a district where he'd run against Nowlin in elections this fall.

"There are some things that could happen down the road," Roy said. "I'm going to look at the numbers more closely again. We go from here to see if we can live with (the cur-

rent plan)."

Roy said the problem with trying to change a remap plan was that every change made affects district lines in all directions. As it stands now, the Roy and Armes district has about 24,000 voters in Rapides Parish, and about 20,000 in Vernon.

Population counts after the 2010 census has set the ideal number for Louisiana House districts at 44,174, where district map makers have a deviation of plus or minus 5 percent of the ideal number.

As the plan was presented on the Legislature's website Friday, Rep. Chris

Hazel, R-Ball, would take in the east and southern sections of Rapides while losing territory in northwest.

Hazel, who spent the last week in House Appropriations Committee meetings, said it was hard to keep up with the pace of remap changes as flurries of amendments put the new map status in hyperflux toward the end.

"My district's changed I don't know how many times now," Hazel said, adding he'd have to study the final bill that passed by the committee to get a true picture.